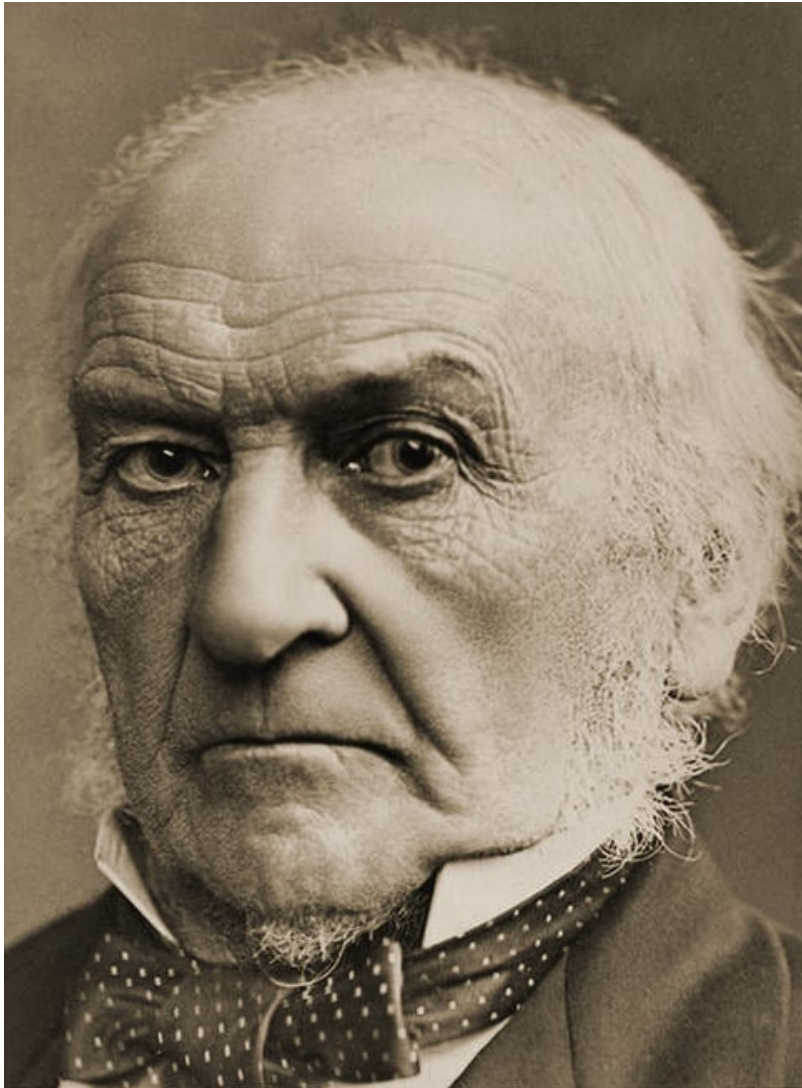


Snowflakes and the Great William Gladstone

by Michael Curtis



The meaningful, if unstated, question is whether the Beatles, the enormously successful rock band formed in Liverpool, northern England in 1960, can save William Gladstone, the British politician and leader of the Liberal Party who served as prime minister for 12 years in non-consecutive four terms between 1868 and 1894, the only person in Britain to serve four terms.

Now, students at the University of Liverpool, led by a 20 year old named Alisha Raithatha, are petitioning the University to

have Gladstone's name removed from a dorm, a hall of residence, which also carries the name of Roscoe, in a building which is currently being demolished to be re-developed. Raithatha may be regarded as one of the increasing number of "snowflakes" among British students, youngsters who are part of, and live according to, the prescriptions of grievance culture, judging the past by the standards of today, more prone to take offence than previous generations, disinviting or preventing controversial speakers at their universities. The sad situation now is, as Professor Robert George has said, "too few have courage to stand up to those who want to shout down dissenting speech."

Snowflakes are falling and keep falling all over the political place, bringing with them an atmosphere of self-righeousness, temper tantrums and unwillingness to engage in any robust debate on issues not to their liking. The snowflakes are attempting to "decolonize" the English Department at Cambridge University in England, to remove the 19th century imperialist, though generous, philanthropist Cecil Rhodes from Oriel College, Oxford, to influence the BBC TV production of *Howard's End* by incorporating black characters who never appear in the famous novel by E.M. Forster published in 1910. Curiously, a sentence from the book seems relevant to present circumstances : "Actual life is full of false clues and signposts that lead nowhere. We nerve ourselves for a crisis that never comes."

The issue of past slavery is a compelling one in Britain as in the U.S. One surprising target in recent years has been and remains Lord Nelson, the heroic and widely admired admiral, whose tall statue in Trafalgar Square, London, is the welcome home for pigeons who rest on his head. Snowflakes have called for the removal of he statue. The pigeons should not suffer because Nelson used his seat in the House of Lords to support friends who ran slave plantations in the West Indies. And now in New York City, Italian-Americans and others may soon be

saying *Goodbye Columbus* to the great 16th century Admiral from Genoa.

The Liverpool snowflakes were “horrified” that were living in a building that was made unpleasant by the name of Gladstone. The students evidently lack any real knowledge of this austere figure, educated at Eton and Oxford, member of Parliament at age 23, a reformer who switched parties from conservative to liberal, and grew more radical with age. In many ways he laid the basis of the British welfare state, introduced the secret ballot for voting, expanded in 1884 the vote to working men in rural areas, critic of imperialism, and a person who spent a lifetime trying to obtain Home Rule for Ireland, a project that was defeated in the House of Lords in 1893.

The snowflakes did not know all this but they perhaps know that William’s father, Sir John Gladstone, owned sugar plantations in the Caribbean, British Guyana and Jamaica, for which he was compensated with £100,000 for losing hundreds of slaves when slavery was abolished in 1833. As an MP, William Gladstone who favored banning the slave trade, had also favored owners getting compensation as well as calling for the improvement of the conditions of the slaves.

Instead of Gladstone, the snowflakes suggested the name of their building should be changed to Jon Snow, a Channel 4 newsreader. Paradoxically, Snow, now 70, had been expelled from the University in 1970 while a law student there for participating in a demonstration against the University’s investments in apartheid South Africa. However, later in 2011 he got an honorary degree from the University.

This call for change of name in the case of Gladstone resembles that a few years ago when the Colston Girls’s School in Bristol, west England, had to grapple with the call to change the name of the School because of the link to Edward Colston, a prominent slave trader in the 17th century. He had shipped 100,000 African slaves to the West Indies and America,

but was also a leading philanthropist in Bristol and had financed the creation of the School. The Colston name remains.

In the case of Gladstone in Liverpool, the Beatles may come to the rescue. One of their well-known songs is *Penny Lane*, written in 1967 probably by Paul McCartney. Penny Lane is a bus terminus and a shopping area in Liverpool where McCartney and John Lennon used to meet. The possible problem is not the sexual allusions in the song, but that the area is named after James Penny, a slave ship captain, a local slave trader who opposed the abolition of the slave trade.

Liverpool public authorities are not likely to entertain, and thousands of Beatle fans would agree, any call to remove the name Penny Lane, "in my ears and in my eyes." It must remain, irrespective of past slavery. Similarly, Liverpool University authorities should act in similar fashion. And perhaps the remaining Beatles might write another song, Gladstone is my bag.

The Liverpool snowflakes should go back to their dorm and their studies and be informed of the amusing words of Benjamin Disraeli on Gladstone, his fierce political rival, "he had no single redeeming defect." From a meteorological point of view, snowflakes are light and pleasant, but in mass they are dangerous, and may cause a blizzard and obstruction. Liverpool should take care.